Food for the Heart

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Food for the Heart

by LagLemon

Summary

After being introduced to a gourmet food on a budget blog by Pepper (a gift for her elderly, cheapskate mother) Tony starts cooking again. The recipies are good, but the blog owner is even better. Still, Tony isn't so sure Captain America, the guy who runs the blog, can compete with Hot Bagboy, the gorgeous blond who works at the grocery store.

(This is a gift fic for chibiesque for the SteveTony Fest!)

Notes

Happy SteveTony Fest!

Let me know if you spot anything funny and I'll fix it! :)

Tony groaned aloud and slumped further into Pepper's puffy, white, leather couch. "Are you ready yet?" he called out. He had been waiting for Pepper to get ready for the past fifteen minutes, and while he knew that he took just as long to get ready some days, he was getting impatient with the lack of movement on her part. Mind you, she was in her bedroom, so it wasn't like he could physically see her and her lack of movement; if he tried to sneak a peek, she would probably smack him upside the head.

"I still need to iron my blouse," Pepper yelled.

Tony groaned again. Ironing took so fucking long! Why couldn't she just look rumpled and dishevelled like the rest of the world in the morning?

"If you're that bored, you can play around with my tablet," Pepper grumbled, poking her head out of her doorway. "It's on the coffee table."

"What's the password?" Tony grumbled, sitting up. He snatched up the tablet, glad to have something to do. He tapped in a number, not really thinking about it and looked up to see Pepper glaring at him, her hands on her hips.

"You hacked you way into my tablet already, didn't you," she growled.

Tony looked down and saw that she was right. Half the time, he didn't realize he was doing it; it was second nature to solve problems, and he was good at it, even subconsciously. He smiled sheepishly. "Sorry," he said.

"No you're not," Pepper said with a huff. "Just don't go searching for porn on that thing. That's my work tablet, remember? I don't want the Board thinking I'm some kind of *sex fiend*."

Tony grinned. "Alrighty. No porn. Got it," he said.

"Good," Pepper said, disappearing back into her room.

Tony opened up her web browser and paused when he saw the website that was still loaded in RAM. "Shit on a Shingle? What the *fuck* have you been looking at, Pep?" he drawled.

Pepper's head reappeared in the doorway. "Oh grow up. It's a food blog," she said. "I was looking up recipes, and it's one of the only blogs out there that has gourmet food for people on a budget."

"Have I been underpaying you?" Tony asked, looking up, baffled by what she had said. Gourmet food for people on a *budget*? Since when did Pepper need something like that?

"It's not for me," Pepper said, rolling her eyes. "It's for my mother."

"Oh, right – the cheap lady. Gotcha," he said with a cluck of his tongue.

“She is not *cheap*,” Pepper said. She sighed and disappeared back into her room again. She poked her head back out three seconds later. “Ok, *fine*. She’s cheap – but she deserves to eat something nice every once in a while, and she won’t learn anything new unless I teach her, so yes, I troll cheap food blogs. Happy?”

“Right,” Tony said, scrolling down the page with a flick of his thumb. He paused. Some of the recipes didn’t look all that bad, actually. He hovered over one for pumpkin pie and licked his lips; he had been thinking about making himself some pie for a while, but hadn’t gotten around to finding a good recipe. Now that one had casually presented itself, he was more than willing to try it out. Why not? He pulled out his phone and typed in the link, saving it for later, and went back to searching for new recipes.

“Tony,” Pepper snapped.

Tony looked up with a jolt, sliding his phone under the pile of papers in front of him. He put on his most winning smile, knowing that it wouldn’t save him from Pepper’s wrath. “Yes?” he said. “Something wrong?”

“What’s your opinion on the latest tests from plant 49B?” Pepper asked, smiling sharply at Tony. Her eyes spoke of murder.

Tony shrugged. “The outputs aren’t all that unexpected. We need to put new air filters in our plants, don’t we? I remember reading that in the report,” he said, glancing down at the papers in front of him.

Pepper’s sharp smile softened; the murderous look faded. “Agreed. The air quality needs to be improved pronto. The problems we’ve had reported to us are far too big to ignore for any longer. We need to act, and we need to act now.” She turned her smile on the rest of the Board.

Thompson, one of the oldest members on the Board in the room sighed laboriously and leaned back in his chair, his report packages balanced precariously on his rubbery gut. “The change will cost us a large chunk of change, Ms. Potts,” he said with a sneer. “*Where* do you expect us to make up the extra cost?”

Pepper’s eyes narrowed; the murderous look didn’t quite return to her face, but Tony could tell it was there nonetheless.

Tony hid his smile behind his hand. He loved watching Pepper tear people apart when they were downright stubbornly *senseless*.

“The profit margin will expand by over twenty percent once we implement the change,” Pepper said, leaning forwards in her chair so she could glare in Thompson’s direction. “Are you saying you don’t *want* an extra twenty percent?”

Thompson swallowed audibly. “That’s not what I’m saying at all,” he groused.

“Well, from all the protesting you’ve been doing, you’re making it hard to believe that you’re interested in putting the company’s best options first,” Pepper said, clasping her hands on the table.

The rest of the Board turned their surly, wrinkled gazes on Thompson; he found no mercy there.

Thompson looked like he wanted to duck under the table. “No, no, Ms. Potts – that’s not what I’m saying at *all*. I merely thought that the cost of improvements would be more than we were willing to pay for production in general. We expect to lose a certain amount of product on the production line – it happens all the time in industries like ours.”

“And it *shouldn’t*,” Tony growled, puffing up. He really *hated* when someone on the Board tried to preach about acceptable losses. Customers shouldn’t have to face that kind of bullshit; products they bought – products with the Stark name on them – should not fail for *any* reason. Stark Industries was not *sloppy*. “We are a company built on credibility, Thompson – by having electronics and goods that *actually* work, we prove that we are the best option out there. We are not running a goddamned dollar store,” Tony said. “If you think it’s appropriate for Stark goods to break down right off the fucking line, you shouldn’t be here.”

Thompson’s face went milk-white. “Mr. Stark, with all due respect,” he said, his voice going shrill.

“That’s just a fancy way of saying I should go fuck myself,” Tony cut in, standing up.

Pepper stiffened. “Mr. Thompson, I think you need to take some time and read through the packet again. The rest of us came here having done that,” she said, coldly.

Thompson stood up, pushing his chair back with shaking hands. His jaw clenched; red began to creep its way up his neck. “I’ve done the reading,” he insisted. “It’s going to cost us a hundred million dollars to replace those filters. That money is better spent on something else.”

“Like what?” Pepper asked. “Advertising? Lawyers? Because, frankly, I don’t see the savings as being worth the cost to the brand. Stark International’s reputation is on the line here, and having faulty products out on the market makes us look cheap and inept, just like Mr. Stark has already said. Do *you* want SI to get that kind of a reputation? Because I don’t – *Mr. Stark* doesn’t – and I’m sure the rest of the Board doesn’t.”

Thompson sat down so fast, it seemed as if his legs had given out on him. “I don’t want the company to *suffer*,” he grunted, tugging at his tie as though it was trying to strangle him. “I just – you know what? Never mind. I can see I’m not going to win this. Fine. You have my approval, so long as the cost isn’t extravagant.”

“Define *extravagant*,” Tony said, cocking his head to the side.

Thompson swallowed audibly again. “We should do whatever you think is best, Mr. Stark,” he said.

Tony flashed Pepper a brilliant smile. “Sounds good to me. So, now that that’s out of the way,” he said, clearing his throat. He gathered up his papers, tucking his phone discretely into his suit’s front pocket. “Are we done for today?”

Pepper smiled radiantly at the rest of the Board. “I think Mr. Stark’s absolutely right. This meeting has gone on for long enough. I’ll have the changes drafted and sent to you for your signatures later in the evening. Does anyone have anything else they’d like to say before we adjourn?”

The members of the Board all shook their heads in unison; it was uncanny how good they were at agreeing at times like thsi, Tony thought with a chuckle. He stood up, planning on racing for the elevator so he could escape to his penthouse. He found his arm caught in Pepper’s vice-like grip.

“And just *where* do you think you’re going?” Pepper drawled.

Tony waited until the rest of the Board had walked out of the room, flashing them his most winning smile and then slumped his shoulders. “To be fair, *you* started it,” he grumbled sullenly.

“Were you looking Shit on a Shingle again?” Pepper asked. She let out a laugh and smacked him in the shoulder. “Damn it, Tony! I thought you were screwing around!” She reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone, turning it on. She tapped her way through the lockscreen; he hadn’t even known that she knew what his password was.

“Oh, I see how it is,” Tony grumbled, rustling his papers so he had something to do with his hands. “Spying on me, are you?”

“I want to know what you’re making me for dinner,” Pepper said with a teasing smile. “Its reconnaissance, not spying.”

Tony groaned and hung his head. “Please don’t make me cook for you,” he said. “You know how bad I am at cooking.”

“You’re not *that* bad, you faker. And besides, you can only polish those beautiful life skills of yours if you use them, so cook and feed me,” Pepper said, patting Tony consolingly on the shoulder. “What are you making tonight?”

Tony took his phone from her and flipped through the open tabs, settling on a simple dish of macaroni and cheese – all of the ingredients needed, being in his cupboard.

Pepper wrinkled her nose. “Really? All that cheese?”

“You don’t have to eat it,” Tony said, cracking a smile.

Pepper sighed and pinched Tony’s cheek. “The things I do for you,” she grumbled.

Tony put the macaroni and cheese recipe up as a hologram in the kitchen while he worked. He kept the projection beside the stove, referring back to it every few minutes. The recipe was simple, yes, but that didn't mean he *couldn't* fuck it up, and with Pepper coming over for dinner, he knew he had to at least make it look like the picture on the blog entry. Pepper would expect nothing less, although she would probably eat it even if it tasted god-awful. At any rate, he owed her for letting him go home early. She was down below in SI's office floors, slaving away over a semi-cold computer, typing up the Board request form like she had promised; she deserved something hot to eat after all of that extra work.

When Tony had first built Stark Tower, with Pepper's help of course, he had designed it with personal comfort in mind. The Tower was located near pretty much everything he would ever need, and whatever he needed that *wasn't* nearby could be reached with Happy's help.

There were three grocery stores in walking distance of the Tower, one of which Tony went to every week, not because he liked the prices or the selection, but because the world's hottest bagboy worked there. Hot Bagboy had a sweet smile, short, golden hair and an ass that looked like it needed to be *squeezed*; the guy didn't even seem to notice that, though, and all he ever did when he saw Tony was smile, offer a cheerful comment and bag groceries.

It was stupid.

Tony didn't even know Hot Bagboy's *name*. He hadn't had the time to ask, and half the time, the guy's nametag was obscured – or he got distracted by the guy's delicious abs and then he just plain forgot to look at anything else.

Whenever he ended up in Hot Bagboy's line, Cranky Greasehair was there too, manning the cash register. Cranky had one arm and a smile that made it clear that he would be willing to kill anyone who so much as *breathed* funny in Hot Bagboy's direction. The two of them always worked together, likely because Cranky couldn't really do all that much grocery bagging with only one arm. Tony suspected that Cranky was a War Veteran; he got the same look Rhodey got sometimes, one that said he had seen too much. Rhodey had left the army too, for the most part, but not for the same reasons; Rhodey was SI's current liaison, working to help them on their various government contracts. Whenever anyone asked him about it, Rhodey always said that he was one of the lucky ones, and seeing Cranky every time he went for groceries made that pretty damn clear to Tony.

Tony didn't get to talk to Rhodey all that much these days, despite the retirement and easy access to a telephone. He had a sneaking suspicion that it was more because Rhodey wasn't ready to talk yet and less because Tony had done something to make him angry. That, and Rhodey was probably busy.

Maybe Rhodey needed a break from the monotony of life.

Tony picked up his phone and took a picture of himself smiling in front of the stove while the macaroni bubbled in the background. He was surprised when Rhodey texted him back almost

immediately.

'*Are you making dinner?*' Rhodey's text read.

Tony texted him back. '*What does it look like?*'

'*Please tell me you didn't break into someone's house in order to steal their food.'* Rhodey responded.

Tony chuckled. He stirred the macaroni and typed at the same time. *'I'm cooking Pep dinner tonight. I owe her one for doing paperwork.'*

Rhodey's next response took longer to arrive. Tony frowned down at the message, perplexed.

'Let me in.' Rhodey's message said.

Let me in? What the fuck was that supposed to mean? Rhodey was in Washington – wasn't he?

"Sir," Jarvis's voice rang out. "I believe Colonel Rhodes wishes to enter the penthouse." The AI's speakers had been hand made by Tony himself, crafted so carefully, they were impossible to ignore or drown out even by the most powerful kitchen fan.

"Rhodey's *here*?" Tony yelped, nearly dropping his phone into the pot of boiling macaroni. "Unlock the door and tell him where the kitchen is!" He wanted to go find Rhodey himself, but instead turned to the pot of cheese sauce, knowing that if he left it alone, it would burn.

Rhodey stalked into the kitchen a full fifteen minutes later with a sports jacket slung over his shoulder; he looked around the kitchen, gave it a nod of appreciation and wrapped his arms around Tony, patting him on the back.

Tony squeezed Rhodey back, still stirring his cheese sauce. "Good to see you, man," he said.

Rhodey let Tony go and leaned against the counter beside the stove, watching Tony with a soft, tired, smile. "I see you're keeping yourself busy. Learning new things?"

"Yep," Tony said, turning the burner under the macaroni off. "Pep found a website – show it to him, Jarvis – it's gold, man. Pure *gold*. I will be eating in style for years to come."

Rhodey snorted and pulled the hologram Jarvis projected for him closer. He flicked through the various blog posts, moving from page to page far slower than usual; he paused on a recipe for Apple Cake. "This sounds good," he said. "You should totally make me cake."

Tony chuckled. "Sure," he said. "How long you staying for this time?"

"What? You think it'll take that long for you to learn how to make me Apple Cake?" Rhodey teased, cocking an eyebrow.

Tony snorted. "Oh *please*. I've baked cakes before. It should be easy."

“You’ve baked miniature *disasters* before,” Rhodey corrected. “I have yet to see an edible cake on your list of projects.”

“I’m working on it,” Tony said with a huff.

“Sure,” Rhodey chuckled. “Well, you’d better start working harder. I’m only going to be here a week or two. I kind of want cake before I have to leave.”

Tony grinned. “I think I can manage that.”

Pepper sat down in her chair, primly crossing her legs. She glanced over at Rhodey, who was licking his lips and staring at the massive bowl of macaroni and cheese in the centre of the table, and let out a snort so loud, it made everyone at the table laugh. The glass of wine beside her rocked in place; she steadied it.

“I’m sorry,” Pepper said, covering her face with her hands. “Today’s been a long day. I didn’t think I’d be spending it eating macaroni and cheese and drinking *wine*.”

“Its *homemade* macaroni and cheese,” Tony said, pushing the bowl and serving spoon towards Pepper. “Go ahead. CEOs first.”

Pepper picked up the serving spoon and started scooping macaroni and cheese onto her plate.

“So,” Rhodey said, nodding to Tony. “I take it you didn’t tell him I was headed out this way?”

“I wanted it to be a secret,” Pepper said. She set the serving spoon down when her plate was covered in macaroni and cheese and pushed it over so the others could reach it.

Rhodey snatched up the bowl of macaroni and cheese and dragged it towards him, eagerly picking up the serving spoon. “I see,” he said. “So you were keeping secrets.”

“You two are cruel,” Tony muttered, crossing his arms over his chest. “First you lie to me, and now you’re eating all of my food.”

“That’s what friends are for,” Rhodey said with a grin. He pushed the bowl of macaroni and cheese over to Tony; it was half empty, and it must have been good, because when Tony looked up, he saw that Pepper was already a quarter of a way through what was on her plate, and Rhodey was close behind her.

Tony scooped himself an unhealthy sized portion and slid the bowl back into the middle of the table. He held his fork up and took a delicate bite; his mouth began to water. *Sweet mother of god* – this shit was amazing! He gobbled up everything he could, knowing that if he didn’t eat fast he likely wouldn’t get a second portion. Rhodey had spent years eating army rations; there was no telling what he would do to get the last serving of something this delicious.

Pepper watched Tony and Rhodey as they battled it out, forks flashing in the light. She took a sip of her wine. “So are you going to tell him, or am I?” she asked.

Rhodey dropped his fork in surprise; Tony put his hand in the last of the macaroni and cheese with a squawk.

Rhocey scowled. “Thanks a lot, Potts.”

Tony pulled the last of the macaroni and cheese over to his plate, grinning from ear to ear.

“You two are a *menace*,” Rhodey muttered. He picked up his beer and took a long draught. “Alright,” he said. “I guess I can tell him.”

“Tell me what?” Tony said through a mouthful of macaroni.

Rhodey sighed. “I’m moving here permanently,” he said.

Tony nearly inhaled his food. “What?”

“Calm down,” Rhodey said, looking alarmed, “Jesus, Tony! Chew – don’t snort your damn food.”

“You’re moving *here*?” Tony coughed, thumping himself on the chest.

“I thought you said you were going to *think* about moving here,” Pepper said, squinting at Rhodey over her glass of wine.

“He knows how to cook now,” Rhodey said with a shrug. “What can I say? Free food made up my mind for me.”

“Glutton,” Pepper chuckled.

“You came to mooch his food too,” Rhodey said with a smirk.

“I already live in the city,” Pepper said, primly. “Besides, he owed me and I wanted to have dinner with you both. It was a win-win situation.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Rhodey said.

“I’m guessing you’re going to look for a place to stay?” Tony said. He cleared his throat and wiped at his mouth, trying to look like an adult despite his urge to bury his face in the bowl so he could lick up the last of the cheese sauce.

“You’re thinking right,” Rhodey sighed. “Man, apartments out here are harder to find than I remembered.”

“I made you a floor at the Tower, you know,” Tony said, setting the empty serving bowl down.

Rhodey chuckled. “Why am I not surprised you did that?”

“He made one for me too,” Pepper said, giving Tony a soft smile. “I think he likes keeping us around.”

“I do not,” Tony grumbled.

“Don’t tease the man,” Rhodey said. “He’s our landlord, now.”

Tony grinned. “I guess I kind of am, aren’t I?”

Once the dishes were loaded up in the dishwasher, and the last of the wine was gone, Rhodey and Pepper headed out to their respective homes. Rhodey was only leaving temporarily; he was retrieving his things and coming back. Pepper, on the other hand, was returning to her apartment on the other side of the city where her dog was waiting for her.

Tony pulled up Shit on a Shingle on a whim. He scrolled through the blog posts and saw that while some people had reviewed the macaroni and cheese recipe, no one had actually commented on it. He pursed his lips in displeasure. That macaroni and cheese had practically brought Rhodey back to New York singlehandedly. It deserved some written praise. He created an account on the site so he could leave a comment and then sat in front of his tablet for a good hour and a half trying to figure out what to call himself. He didn’t want to out himself as being Tony Stark – that was for sure. He didn’t want to traumatize anyone, or worse, having the blog owner think he was some crazy person, *pretending* to be him.

What username would work?

Tony turned and looked at the television; it was running on mute, streaming infomercials. He frowned when a man holding an iron burned himself while flailing around.

“Jarvis – unmute the TV,” Tony said.

“Are you a man having problems with your iron? Are wrinkled shirts keeping you up at night? Buy Iron All, the solution to all of your troubles. Be a real man! Get Iron All!” the infomercial announcer said.

Tony smirked. The sight of the man flailing around with an iron was almost too funny. He tapped his chin. He could remember his father telling him when he was younger that Stark men were made of iron; it had been a family motto, of sorts. The word iron hadn’t completely been ruined for him, though. His mother had called him her little Iron Man whenever Howard wasn’t around; that had been sort of a joke between them, and Tony had always loved hearing her say those special words. Maybe that was it! Maybe this was the solution to his username problems!

“Iron Man? How does that sound, Jarvis?” Tony said, gnawing at the edge of his thumbnail. His mother would have laughed at it, and the thought of her smiling at him made him smile in return.

“Iron Man as a username, sir?” Jarvis asked.

“That’s what I was thinking,” Tony said.

“I believe it is available, sir,” Jarvis said.

Tony chuckled. “Alright. Iron Man it is,” he said. He typed the words in, careful to make sure he had it spelled correctly and hit enter. Now to plan out the comment. He drummed his fingers on his thigh and then began typing.

‘*Your macaroni and cheese is horrible! Now my friends won’t stop asking to come over for dinner and I’m going to have to keep making it. I think one of them is going to move in with me now, too. Thanks a lot!’*

Tony grinned. “Do you think that’s too much?”

“I believe you may wish to clarify that the food is indeed *good*, sir,” Jarvis said, dryly.

“Spoilsport,” Tony grumbled. “How about this?”

‘*Your macaroni and cheese is too good! Now my friends won’t stop asking to come over for dinner and I’m going to have to keep making it. I think one of them is going to move in with me now, too. Thanks a lot!’ – Iron Man*

“Better?” Tony asked.

“I believe so, sir,” Jarvis said. “Perhaps you should also leave a rating of five stars?”

“Sounds like a good plan,” Tony said. He clicked on the fifth star, maxing it out at five out of five and hit enter. He grinned, happy that his vote had helped the recipe’s rating climb even higher. “Alright – I think we’re good for tonight.”

“Sir,” Jarvis said, just as Tony was about to close his tablet. “Your review has been responded to.”

Tony frowned. Someone had commented on his comment? Normally, he didn’t give two shits about responses, but today he kind of wanted to see what had been written. Had they called him a liar? Had they disagreed?

The comment wasn’t from another stranger; it was from the blog owner.

‘*Gee, I think I’m going to have to put a warning over it if it’s had that effect on your life. :) No one needs their pal living on their couch all the time just because the mac and cheese was too good.’ - Captain America.*

Tony smirked, typing quickly so ‘Captain America’ couldn’t miss it.

‘*Maybe mine turned out better than yours if your friends didn’t try to move in with you too :P I have good taste, what can I say?’ – Iron Man*

The dear Captain's response was seconds later.

'*Should I be offended by that, or flattered?' – Captain America*

Tony smirked.

'*Flattered – definitely flattered. Of course, I'll have to try another one of your recipes to see if you've got good taste too. Any recommendations?' – Iron Man*

Tony stared at his tablet, willing Captain America to say something back; he frowned when he realized that twenty minutes had gone by already and there was still no response. Sighing, he set the tablet down and rubbed a hand over his eyes. It was already ten thirty. He really should be working instead of staring at his tablet waiting for a stranger to reply to a comment.

He stood up, heading towards the kitchen to get himself a cup of coffee so he could power through the night, and spun around so fast he nearly gave himself whiplash when he heard his tablet ding. He dove for the couch and scooped up the tablet, sinking down into the cushions he had so recently vacated.

Captain America's response was a long one.

'*Well, if you're thinking of dinner for your friends, I'd suggest going with one of the larger recipes. I have a few for different kinds of soups, stews and sandwiches. There are a bunch of deserts on the sidebar that are good for any occasion, and a few that are holiday specific – I'm sure you can sort through all of that on your own and see what you like. Personally, I'm fond of the Apple Cake and the Apple Pies ;) I'm glad you liked my food enough to comment. I don't get a lot of those, and most of the ones I do get are from bots trying to get people to head to their sites. Sorry it took so long to respond. I had to get ready for work, but I wanted to send this off before I left in case you thought I was ignoring you. Thanks again for the comment!' – Captain America*

Tony rolled his eyes. This guy was goddamned bizarre. Here he was thanking Tony for a comment like it was some kind of golden egg crapped out by a golden goose. He couldn't help smiling though. Captain America liked Apple Cake, huh? Maybe that was a good recipe to start with. Rhodey had said he wanted to try some, after all. He typed quickly, already scanning the recipe for the Apple Cake, and left a response before he headed to the kitchen.

'*Thanks for the suggestions, Cap. Have a good night! I'll let you know how the food turns out.' – Iron Man*

There was only one problem with his plan to bake.

There were no apples in his fridge.

Tony let out a long, pained, sigh. Why hadn't he thought to buy apples? He glared down at his tablet where the ingredient list was highlighted and blinking at him accusingly. Apples. Apples. Apples. He closed the fridge and trudged over to the cupboards where he had left his keys out on the counter. He looked down at his tablet. It was only ten fourty five; there was

still plenty of time to hit up the grocery store. He patted his pockets. “Jarvis?” he called out. “Where did I leave my wallet?”

“Your wallet is currently located on your dresser in your bedroom, sir. You took it out of your pants when you went to take a shower,” Jarvis said.

“Excellent,” Tony said, stuffing his keys into his pocket.

“Would you like me to call Mr. Hogan, sir?” Jarvis asked.

“I don’t need a *bodyguard* to go get apples. I’ll be fine. Don’t wake up Happy for that – you know how he gets when I drag him out after he’s already been in bed for an hour. He’ll be grumbling and glaring for the next two days,” Tony said. He strolled into his bedroom and scooped up the jacket he had left lying on his bed, tugging it on. It was one of the least conspicuous ones he owned, one that made it clear he wasn’t a hobo, but didn’t scream ‘rob me at knifepoint’. He grabbed his wallet and opened it up, checking the contents. He had over seven hundred dollars in it; that would do for one trip to the grocery store, right? He put his wallet into his pocket and headed for the elevator, whistling to himself.

“Sir? I believe Ms. Potts would be much happier if you took Mr. Hogan with you,” Jarvis said as Tony reached the penthouse elevator.

Tony snorted and shook his head. “I’m not calling Happy just so he can drive me around the block. Seriously, Jarvis. I know you worry, but I’ll be fine.”

“What time shall I tell Mr. Rhodes to expect you back by?” Jarvis asked.

Tony stepped into the elevator as it opened. “If he asks, tell him I’ll be back in two hours. I’ll text him if I’m staying out later,” he said.

Tony weaved his way through a group of late night movie-goers and slipped into the Safeway, eyeing the group of panhandlers at the front entrance. He dropped each one of them a fifty dollar bill and snuck inside while they gaped at the money, glad to have helped.

The store wasn’t all that full at this time of night; people were still picking over produce and the day’s sales, but they were taking their time about it. Most places were open till midnight, and there was plenty of time to linger and look over purchases. The shelves were half empty, waiting for their nightly restocking, but there was more than enough to go around.

Tony pulled out his phone and brought up the Apple Cake recipe, scrolling down to the ingredient list. The apples Captain America had used were a mixture of Ambrosia, Gala and Honeycrisp. The recipe said to go light on the Honeycrisps if they weren’t in season or on sale, which was understandable considering the recipes were supposed to be for people living on a budget; the rest of the apples were cheaper and easier to come by and they tasted just as good.

Tony strode down the fruit aisle with purpose. There were a hell of a lot of different kinds of fruit here, but thankfully some kind soul had decided to keep things organized. The apples were clustered together in two rows, stacked on tables or heaped in cardboard bins; the bananas and pears were off on their own side, sharing space with a bunch of boxed berries. Everything that had been pre-cut and packaged was off to the side in a refrigerated display case.

Tony scanned the tags hanging above him on a piece of cord. He stopped in front of three big cardboard bins, finding the apples he had been looking for with relative ease. He reached into the bin of Galas and felt up the apples, checking them for ripeness and bruising; satisfied that they were alright, he pulled a plastic bag off the roll and loaded it up with the nicest looking ones he could find. He tied the bag off, grabbed another and selected a few Honeycrisps so he could mix things up. Finished with the apples, he set the bags down by his feet and checked his phone again when he was done, flipping tabs to read the pumpkin pie recipe. It was better to grab everything he needed now, he reasoned. He had a feeling that if he was tempted to make Apple Cake in the middle of the night, he was going to want to make a pumpkin pie the same way. The ingredients for the pie included things Tony didn't have in his cupboards – and if they did exist, they were probably expired. He needed cinnamon, nutmeg, and a boatload of other spices. There was a bolded line above the recipe that said to not use pumpkin pie spice mix; Tony had a feeling that that warning was there for a very good reason.

He picked up his apples and carried them to the baking aisle. It was deserted; apparently no one else wanted to bake this late, aside from him. He grabbed the little jars of spices off the shelf, stacking everything neatly in a tower and checked his recipe list one last time. Ah, he thought, stuffing his phone into his pocket one-handed. Pumpkin puree. Pumpkin pie kind of needed that bit. He added a can to the tower.

Cursing his decision to not pick up a basket the second he had walked into the store, he carried everything back to the tills and glanced around. Where should he dump his groceries? There were three women manning tills to his left and – oh *yes*! Yes! Hot Bagboy was here! Tony sprinted to the till.

Cranky Greashair gave Tony a withering look when Tony dumped his groceries down on the conveyer belt. "You *always* forget the basket," he grumbled as he leaned on the button to get the conveyer belt moving.

Tony flashed Cranky a grin. "The baskets were too far away."

Cranky sighed and shook his head. He picked up the tiny can of cinnamon and blipped it through, tossing it to Hot Bagboy, who gently set it in a plastic bag.

"Nice to see you again," Hot Bagboy said, flashing Tony a smile that was all sweetness and sincerity.

"Nice to see you too, *handsome*," Tony said with a wink.

Hot Bagboy blushed and ducked his head.

Cranky threw the container of allspice at Hot Bagboy's head. "Stop flirting and start bagging," he muttered.

"You're lucky I didn't buy any tea today," Tony said, smiling sweetly.

Cranky's eyes narrowed. "You did *not* just say that," he growled, glaring at Tony.

Hot Bagboy frowned, glancing from Tony to Cranky. "What?"

"You're *kidding*," Cranky said in exasperation, looking at Hot Bagboy. "You didn't get that?"

"Not really," Hot Bagboy admitted. He smiled weakly at Tony.

Tony smiled back. "Sorry – it's been a long day. I'll behave myself from now on, I promise."

"Yeah *right*," Cranky snorted. He scanned the last of Tony's spices and moved on to the can of pumpkin puree; once it was blipped through, he lifted up the apples and put them down on the scale, weighing them. He tapped in the code for their prices and handed the bag off to Hot Bagboy.

"Making a pumpkin pie?" Hot Bagboy asked, still smiling at Tony.

"Planning on it," Tony said, pulling out his wallet. "I'm making an Apple Cake first. I need to test my skills a little first."

Hot Bagboy nodded. "Sounds like a good plan. Apple Cake is my favourite," he said.

"Maybe I'll bring you a slice," Tony said. He handed Cranky the money he owed for his groceries and took his change back; he would have given it to them as a tip, but he had tried that once and nearly lost an eye when it was pitched back at his head.

Hot Bagboy held out the plastic bags holding Tony's groceries. "That's a nice offer," he said.

"He'll probably give you food poisoning," Cranky grumbled under his breath.

Hot Bagboy elbowed Cranky in the side.

Cranky grimaced and turned to the next customer, clearly not wanting to drag the conversation out any longer than necessary.

Tony flashed Hot Bagboy a smile. "See you later, hot stuff."

Hot Bagboy grinned. "Same to you."

Tony left the store with a skip in his step.

Rhodey watched suspiciously as Tony grated apples into the batter he had prepared. “Are you *sure* it’s supposed to be that colour?” he asked.

“It looks like this in the recipe,” Tony grumbled. He grated another apple. “Ingrate – doubting my skills!”

“It’s my *stomach* doing the doubting, not me,” Rhodey said. He yawned. “You didn’t have to do this right now, you know. I said I wanted cake but it didn’t have to be right this second.”

“I know,” Tony said. “But I want Apple Cake, and this is the only way to get it unless I want to wait until morning and I do not want to wait – nor do I want to be awake in the morning.”

“Don’t you have a Board Meeting tomorrow at eight?” Rhodey asked.

“I don’t know,” Tony sighed. “Jarvis?”

“There was a meeting scheduled for eight fifteen, sir, but it has been crossed out at Ms. Potts’ request. I believe she canceled it because she has already received the signatures from the Board she needed to implement changes to the filtration systems.”

“Good!” Tony said, tossing his apple core into the food-scraps bin to his left. He picked up the wooden spoon he had abandoned and started mixing; the apple bits vanished from sight. He didn’t care what Rhodey said. The batter *looked* fine to him – hell, it smelled pretty damn fine too.

“I do, however, have some bad news to relay, sir,” Jarvis said.

Tony sighed and kept on stirring. “What is it now?”

“Ms. Potts has informed me that you will be required to meet her at your personal jet tomorrow morning at ten a.m. for a quick trip to San Francisco. A potential whistleblower has requested a private meeting, and Ms. Potts believes it will solve many of the problems she has been having with the Board,” Jarvis said.

Tony scowled. “Great, so now I need to pack and be ready to go for seven. I’m going to have an even *earlier* morning.”

“Ms. Potts has already taken care of packing for you,” Jarvis said.

“Don’t you mean Mr. Rhodes has?” Rhodey chuckled. “I’m pretty sure I’m the one who packed the overnight bag.” He looked seriously at Tony and jabbed him in the shoulder. “I packed your *underwear*, man. You owe me one.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “It’s not like you haven’t seen my undies before,” he said.

“I’ve never had to touch them before. That’s completely different,” Rhodey grumbled. He watched idly as Tony spooned cake batter into a non-stick pan.

“Hey,” Tony said, “at least they were *clean*! It wasn’t like you were scooping them up off the floor!”

“Fair enough,” Rhodey conceded. “But you still owe me.”

“I’m making you Apple Cake,” Tony said, dumping the last scoopful of batter into the pan. “Does that count?”

“I suppose it can,” Rhodey sighed. “If it’s edible.”

“It’ll be edible,” Tony promised eagerly. He picked the pan up and put it delicately in the oven. He glared at the oven in warning. “It had better be edible.”

The cake was indeed edible; so edible, in fact that by the time three a.m. rolled around, Rhodey and Tony had polished the entire thing off. Tony fell asleep with a happy smile on his face, completely forgetting that he had to be up in four hours.

Tony groaned as he crawled out of his green BMW; Happy lurked behind him with his hands held out, waiting there just in case Tony tipped over like an overtired toddler. Groggy, and craving his morning coffee, Tony stumbled across the tarmac to his private jet. He made it up the steps and collapsed in a heap in the nearest seat, putting his face in Pepper’s lap.

Pepper looked up from the papers she had been reading; she was used to his impromptu greetings. “I take it you had a rough night,” she said, dryly. “Did you and Rhodey have fun?”

“We ate Apple Cake,” Tony moaned, rolling over so he could push the arm of the chair up and out of his way. “It was so, *so* good.”

“I see,” Pepper said, flipping a page.

“I think I’m going to puke,” Tony said.

“Well, don’t do it on me,” Pepper said.

“I should tell Captain America how good that cake was,” Tony sighed, closing his eyes. He wormed his way closer to Pepper’s warm thighs again, using them as a pillow.

“And who, might I ask, is Captain America?” Pepper said, setting her papers down on top of Tony’s head.

“He runs Shit on a Shingle,” Tony mumbled through the papers. “Remind me to comment later, ok?”

“Sure,” Pepper said, gently patting Tony’s back. “They’re going to want you to sit up for takeoff, you know.”

“I know,” Tony mumbled into Pepper’s leg. “Just five more minutes.”

Tony hated meetings, even ones that were with people trying to give him some decent information; he let Pepper take the lead and listened quietly, taking notes on his phone, all the while trying to compose the comment he wanted to leave on Captain America's Apple Cake recipe. He licked his dry lips. Just thinking about the cake made him want more of it. He was going to have to hit up the grocery store again when he got home, or else Rhodey was never going to leave him alone. He knew he could have asked Rhodey to pick up fresh apples, but with the chance of seeing Hot Bagboy at almost a one hundred percent, he refused to let the opportunity go to waste.

"Tony?" Pepper sighed, lowering the yellow, lined, notepad she had been writing on. "Were you listening?"

"Hammer Industries may be slowly creeping their way into my production lines by tampering with the supply lines," Tony said, still looking down at his phone. "I was listening. I'm multi-tasking."

"Right," Pepper sighed. She pinched the bridge of her nose. Her hair had started falling out of the sides of her bun; she looked exhausted, and it was only three in the afternoon.

"I've got Jarvis going over the security footage for the plant right now," Tony said, still browsing Shit on a Shingle's recipe list. "I already sent a letter off to the lawyers about getting a search done on Hammer's files, and I've arranged for our auditors to head up to her plant and 'spontaneously' check the materials and numbers out before someone can figure out I know about his little scheme." Tony looked up and flashed their whistleblower a smile.

The whistleblower looked tired as hell, almost as tired as Pepper; she had black rings around her eyes from having spent the night gathering documentation for their meeting. She was wearing a grey track suit, likely having snuck away to meet them while pretending to be at the gym.

Pepper smiled softly at Tony. "You know, sometimes I forget your brain works that fast," she said.

"Don't worry," Tony said, turning back to his phone. "I forget about it too. Hey, does this sound good to you?" He handed Pepper his phone where his diligently typed out comment was waiting.

Pepper frowned down at the text.

"Is that a good frown, or a bad frown?" Tony asked.

"It's a good frown. I just didn't realize you were *flirting* with Captain America," Pepper said. She handed the phone back.

"But it's fine, right?" Tony said, glancing nervously down at his phone. Christ, he thought to himself, he hadn't been the uncomfortable posting something on the internet in years. He reread the comment, gnawing on his lower lip.

‘Thanks a lot, Cap! My friend and I ate the entire cake in one sitting, it was that good. ;) I’m going to blame you when I can’t pull my pants up anymore. You’re going to make my butt so jiggly.’ – Iron Man

“It’s the butt part, isn’t it,” Tony sighed.

“Well, if you’re flirting with him, talking about your ass is probably a good move,” Pepper said. She let out a snort when she noticed how confused the whistleblower looked. She leaned forwards and put her hand on the other woman’s hand. “He’s fallen in love with a food blog,” she explained. “Don’t worry. He’s not crazy.”

Tony looked up and feigned hurt. “You’re the cruelest CEO I’ve ever had!”

“Liar,” Pepper chuckled. “Go ahead Lydia,” she said to the whistleblower. “You can head back home now. We’ll be in touch – and don’t worry. We’ll keep you out of it, and if someone finds out, you will keep your job. Mr. Stark and I will personally guarantee that.”

Lydia smiled wearily. “Thank you Ms. Potts,” she said, standing up. “If you need anything else, just let me know.”

“Will do,” Tony said. He held out his hand; she took it with wide, frightened eyes.

“Mr. Stark?” Lydia said.

“Seriously,” Tony said. “Thank you. If you ever need anything – anything – don’t hesitate. Tell me, and I’ll make it happen.”

Lydia nodded feverishly. “Thank you Mr. Stark.”

Tony took out a business card from his pocket; it was one of the ones he handed out for personal business – not his corporate card. His private number was on it, one that only a handful of people had access to at any given time.

Lydia took the card with trembling fingers.

“That’s my private number,” Tony explained. “Feel free to call whenever.”

Lydia nodded again. “Thanks,” she said. “I’ll keep it to myself.”

“I’d appreciate that,” Tony said with a smile. “That’s one number the paparazzi don’t have, and I’d like it to stay that way.”

Lydia nodded even harder. “Yes, Mr. Stark.”

Pepper smiled and stood up, tucking her notepad into her purse. “Alright, well let’s get going,” she said. “Again, thank you Lydia. If you hear anything else, please let us know.” She shook Lydia’s hand and looped her arm through Tony’s dragging him towards the front door as Lydia headed to the side entrance so she could sneak out of the building.

Tony turned his attention back to his phone the moment they hit the street. “Do you really think it’s bad?” he asked.

“It’s not bad,” Pepper said, dragging Tony towards the closest café she could find. “Really. It’s just weird.”

“Weird?” Tony looked up, startled.

Pepper pulled Tony through the front door of Café Mousse.

Tony squinted at Pepper as she led him towards the till. “What do you mean weird?”

“I’m not used to seeing you really having to *work* at flirting,” Pepper said. She reached over and pulled Tony’s wallet out of his pocket. “You owe me a Macchiato and dinner,” she said.

Tony frowned down at his phone again.

“Tony,” Pepper sighed, putting a hand on his shoulder. “Honey – I’m serious. It sounds fine.”

“Are you sure?” Tony sighed.

Pepper reached over Tony’s shoulder and hit send; the comment vanished.

Tony panicked for a whole ten seconds before realizing that unless he wanted to hack his way into Captain America’s blog, the comment was there for good. He clutched at his phone uselessly. “I hate it when you do that,” he grumbled.

“Well you weren’t going to press send, so I did it for you,” Pepper said. She smiled cheerfully at the Barista as they reached the front of the line and held out Tony’s card. “I’d like a large Hazelnut Macchiato and he’ll have a large soy Cinnamon Almond Latte,” she said.

The Barista rang up their purchases up and gave Pepper her receipt. Pepper tucked Tony’s credit card back into his wallet and put it back into his pocket; she gave him a gentle pat and steered him towards the pickup counter.

“He hasn’t responded,” Tony said, glaring down at his phone.

“Isn’t there some kind of saying about a watched chat never updates?” Pepper said, leaning against the counter.

“I think it’s a watched pot never boiling, but I get what you mean,” Tony said.

“So leave it. Let it sit until after dinner,” Pepper said, soothingly. “You can stare at your phone the entire way home if you want.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Gee – thanks.”

“Now put that phone away before I steal it from you,” Pepper said, picking up their drinks.

Tony tucked his phone away, holding a hand protectively over the pocket it was in. “You wouldn’t!”

Pepper smiled sweetly and handed Tony his drink.

“You would,” Tony said, taking a step backwards.

“Take your drink and find us a place to eat,” Pepper said with a laugh. “I’m starving.”

True to Pepper’s words, Tony spent the entire flight staring down at his phone waiting for Captain America to respond to his comment. By the time they landed, he was fairly certain he had sweated through his shirt, although he couldn’t be sure because he refused to take his sports jacket off to check until they were far away from prying eyes.

Pepper sent him back to the tower and returned to her apartment with a promise to see him later.

Tony paced across his kitchen, moving from the stove to the dinner table, wringing his hands. He had long since put his phone on the counter behind him; Jarvis was watching the comment he had made and would let him know if anything changed.

Still, Tony felt like he should be doing something. He felt itchy all over.

“Jarvis?” Tony said, drumming his fingers on his hand. “Is Rhodey awake still?”

“Colonel Rhodes is asleep,” Jarvis said. “It is currently three in the morning sir. Might I suggest that you go to sleep as well?”

“You can suggest it all you want,” Tony grumbled, heading for the kitchen pantry. “We both know I’m too wired to sleep right now.”

“Might I ask what you wish to make, sir?” Jarvis asked.

“I’m going to make a pumpkin pie,” Tony said, piling ingredients on the counter. “Pull up Captain America’s recipe for Pumpkin Pie, will you?”

A hologram of the recipe appeared in front of Tony, shimmering in blue.

Tony scanned the list, nodding along with each line as he read. He had everything he needed right here, and while he wanted to take another trip to the store so he could see Hot Bagboy, he knew that the store wouldn’t be open. He sighed, pulled out a metal mixing bowl and got to work.

Rhodey looked across the table at Tony over a massive slice of pumpkin pie. “It’s eight in the morning, and we’re eating pie?” he asked, dubiously.

“You have a fork in your hand,” Tony said, through a mouthful of food. “Don’t lie and pretend you’re not going to eat it.”

“Oh, I didn’t say I wasn’t going to eat it,” Rhodey said, pulling his piece of pie closer. “I was just pointing out that pie is not generally a part of breakfast.”

“It’s good pie,” Tony lamented, staring down at his plate and his piece of pie.

“If it’s so good,” Rhodey said, cutting a piece of pie with his fork, “Why do you look like you’re going to burst into tears.”

“It’s too good!” Tony sighed, stuffing another forkful of pie into his mouth. “There’s nothing left.”

Rhodey frowned. “How much pie have you eaten?” he asked.

Tony scowled down at his plate. “The entire pie except for the piece you have,” he admitted.

Rhodey cocked an eyebrow. “You ate an *entire* pie?”

“Yes,” Tony grunted, cutting another sliver of the pie on his plate, portioning it out to make it last.

“Why?” Rhodey asked, looking baffled.

“Captain America didn’t respond to my comment,” Tony said.

“A stranger on the internet didn’t respond to your comment, so you decided to eat an entire pumpkin pie?” Rhodey shook his head. “Don’t bother correcting me. Missing one piece is just as bad as eating the entire thing,” he said. He took a bite of pie and let out a low, soft, moan. “Damn that’s good pie.”

“I know,” Tony groaned, pushing his plate away.

“You should tell him, or her,” Rhodey said. “Captain America – that’s kind of ambiguous.”

“I don’t know. They never said it outright but it sounds like a guy. That part doesn’t matter. Whatever Cap goes by is fine with me,” Tony said.

“That’s a good way to look at it,” Rhodey said, saluting Tony with his fork. “So try and reach him again.”

“Cap didn’t answer my last comment. Why would he answer this time?” Tony grumbled into the table.

“How long as it been since you commented?” Rhodey asked.

“Ten hours and five minutes,” Tony said.

“Ok,” Rhodey said, shaking his head. “Let’s think about this *logically*.”

“I thought I was,” Tony muttered.

“This guy is a normal human, yes? Someone who works a job, pays rent, has bills to pay etcetera?” Rhodey said.

“Presumably, yes,” Tony said.

“So what makes you think he’s on the internet every hour of the day?” Rhodey said. He cut another piece of his pie and ate it with a grin.

“Shit,” Tony said. He frowned into the table. He hadn’t thought about it that way. Maybe he had jumped the gun a little.

“So comment again,” Rhodey said. “Tell him that his pie is a thing of *beauty*. Offer to kiss him – or blow him. I don’t know – say something else. The point is, you still have time. If the guy hasn’t responded in a week, then ok, I guess that means he’s not interested, but until then, keep trying.”

Tony lifted his head and looked around for his tablet. He spotted it on the counter a few feet away and let out a long, high pitched whine.

“You can’t get up, can you,” Rhodey said with a chuckle. “You’re too full of pie.”

“I want to remain full of pie,” Tony grumbled. He set his head back down on the table. “It can wait.”

Rhodey sighed and stood up. He stalked over to the tablet and picked it up, setting it down beside Tony’s head.

Tony smiled up at him.

“You owe me more pie,” Rhodey said, sitting down. He pulled his piece of pie closer and then stole the remaining pieces off of Tony’s plate for good measure.

“Thanks,” Tony said. He began to type, each movement slow but steady.

Rhodey watched Tony as he ate, tilting his head to the side. “You really like this blogger, huh?”

“I don’t know,” Tony said. “I’ve only talked to him once. He seemed nice.”

“Ah,” Rhodey said, spearing the final piece of pie on his plate. He popped it into his mouth, chewing slowly as he savored the delicate spices.

Tony stared down at the text blinking in front of him. Was this good? Or was he just making himself sound like a complete jackass?

'*I made one of your pumpkin pies tonight. It was so delicious, I think I'm going to have to make another one! :) You've given me the courage to tackle a goddamned turkey now – thanks a lot, Cap. I will fear no bird this year! Thanksgiving will be mine!' – Iron Man*

Tony gave his head a shake. It was fine. He hit send, taking a page from Pepper's book and set the tablet down; he closed his eyes, finally aware of the exhaustion that had been creeping into his bones.

"When did you sleep last?" Rhodey asked.

"I don't know," Tony said. "I think I slept on the plane."

"Jarvis?" Rhodey asked.

"Mr. Stark has yet to sleep properly," Jarvis said. "He slept for approximately fifteen minutes while in the air and then slept again for another ten minutes while he was being driven back to the tower."

"Alright," Rhodey said, standing up. He stalked around the table and stood behind Tony, leaning over the back of the chair. "Stand up."

Tony yawned and stood slowly.

Rhodey wrapped an arm around Tony's middle, threw Tony's arm over his shoulder and turned him towards his bedroom. "Alright," he said. "You're going to sleep. No protesting."

"Yes, mom," Tony slurred. He slumped against Rhodey, letting himself be half-carried, half-dragged away from the kitchen table. He closed his eyes again. Just a few minutes of sleep. It would be fine. Captain America would comment back. He knew he would.

Tony woke to the sound of his tablet dinging. He rolled over and found that Rhodey had thoughtfully left it lying on his pillow, where he could easily find it. He smiled sleepily and pushed his way past the lockscreen, noticing the email icon flashing at the top. He didn't expect to see Captain America's comment, but there it was – there *both* of them were.

'*I had to work a double shift last night, so I didn't get the chance to mess around on my computer until now. The turkeys I've tackled have been heavy, so definitely watch out your toes – those are tricky birds. Wow! You ate an entire pumpkin pie? I don't think it's entirely healthy to eat an entire pie on your own, so maybe wait a bit before you make another one. I don't want to have the only person I've talked to on this blog die from pie ;) You're far too precious for that kind of a fate!' – Captain America.*

Tony rubbed at his eyes, sure that he had been dreaming with his eyes open. He reread the comment and then grinned to himself. Well, well, well. Captain America thought he was far too precious to die from eating his weight in pie? Maybe there was hope after all! He scrolled down to the next email notification.

'*Hi again! I just checked and saw that you'd left a message on the Apple Cake recipe too. Uh, I don't know about that. Having a jiggly butt might not be such a bad thing ;)' – Captain America*

Tony let out a choked laugh. Captain America didn't mind a little jiggly butt?

"Sir?" Jarvis said.

"Yes?" Tony said, sitting up.

"Colonel Rhodes has gone with Ms. Potts for lunch. They are requesting to know what you would like them to bring back for you," Jarvis said.

"Hm, well, some cheeseburgers would be good," Tony yawned, glancing down at his tablet. "You know what? I think I'll go out and get myself some groceries while I wait." He got up, stretching, and wiggled his toes in the plush red carpet beneath his feet. He hadn't felt this rested in a long time. He picked his tablet up and tapped on the first email notification for Captain America's comment and began typing a response.

'*You can lift my turkey any day! ;)' Iron Man*

Tony stared at the line, humming to himself. He set the tablet down on his dresser after hitting send and pulled open the top drawer, looking for a clean t-shirt. He picked up a red shirt with a slice of cake on it.

His tablet let out a ding.

Tony reached for it, pulling on his shirt.

Captain America had responded – and quickly.

'*Only if you ask nicely :)' – Captain America.*

Tony grinned. Today was going to be a good day.

The grocery store was crowded. Tony grumbled to himself as he was elbowed for the ninth time; he hated crowds, and this one was no exception. There were far too many people here who weren't looking where they were walking, and half of them didn't seem to get the fact that other people were – gasp – walking *beside* them. He wiggled his way through a group of children swarming a bin of bulk candy and made his way back to the baking aisle.

The aisle was mostly empty, aside from the wizened old woman with a cane who was diligently trying to find the one pack of pudding she wanted amidst a pile of others that were either the wrong flavor, open or squashed. Tony made his way over to the pumpkin puree and grabbed three cans. If he was making pumpkin pie, he was going to need at *least* three – enough for one for him, Pepper and Rhodey. He glanced over at a shelf full of icing sugar and drummed his index finger on this chin. Whipping cream or no whipping cream? The pie was delicious on its own, but whipping cream might be nice on a piece or two. It would require hitting up the dairy aisle, however, and he wasn't sure how much he wanted to brave the crowd again.

He picked up a bag of icing sugar. Fuck it. Whipping cream sounded too good to pass up.

He trudged to the dairy aisle, nimbly stepping over an unsupervised child who was trying to eat his way through a box of crayons, and snatched up a carton of whipping cream.

Satisfied with his selection, he returned to the front of the store; he went up on his toes and scanned the cashiers, looking for Hot Bagboy's familiar face. He spotted him a few tills away and bolted, ducking and weaving around a man and his three toddlers who was trying to head to the same till. He knew he looked like an asshole, but he didn't care. Hot Bagboy was there, standing with Cranky Greasehair, and all was good in the world. He set his things down on the conveyer belt and put his hands in his pockets, plastering a cocky grin on his face.

Cranky Greasehair took one look at Tony and snorted loudly. "I told you he was full of shit," he said, turning to Hot Bagboy. "He wasn't going to bring you food."

Hot Bagboy flushed. "I didn't say that," he protested.

Tony froze. Oh *fuck*! Cranky was right! He had promised to bring Steve a piece of Apple Cake, and he had eaten it all.

Hot Bagboy smiled at Tony. "It's ok – I know you were just kidding. He's just making a big deal about it because *he* wanted cake."

Cranky snorted again and turned back to scanning the cans of pumpkin puree.

"I'll make it up to you," Tony said, clearing his throat. "Dinner?"

Cranky dropped a can of pumpkin puree on his foot. "Son of a *bitch*!"

Hot Bagboy turned from Tony to Cranky, looking concerned. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," Cranky snapped, setting the can down on the conveyer belt.

"So, uh," Tony said, fiddling with his wallet. "Can I take you out to dinner sometime?"

Cranky sighed wearily and turned back to scanning items.

Hot Bagboy's eyes lit up. "Sure," he said. He reached out and turned Cranky around so he could grab the pen from his breast pocket. He snatched up a scrap of paper and wrote his number down.

Cranky glared at Tony. He nodded to the cans of pumpkin puree. “You hurt him, pal, and I’ll beat your ass.”

Tony smiled brightly. “I’m Tony, by the way,” he said, holding out his hand.

Cranky scowled. “Bucky Barnes,” he said. He didn’t hold out his hand; he turned back to the groceries instead.

“I’m Steve Rogers,” Hot Bagboy said.

“Nice to meet you, Steve Rogers,” Tony said, accepting the piece of paper. He tucked it carefully into his wallet as he fished out enough money to pay his bill. “I’ll call you later tonight, if that’s ok with you.”

“That would be perfect,” Steve said. He held the pen out to Tony, shifting on his feet. “Can I have your number too? Just in case?”

Tony grinned. “Sure,” he said. He looked around for a piece of paper and found one stuffed unceremoniously into his hand by Bucky.

“Thanks,” Tony said.

Bucky scowled again and opened the till. He put Tony’s money inside and sorted through the change before dumping it in front of Tony, spilling coins everywhere.

Tony wrote his number out as neatly as possible. It wouldn’t do if Steve couldn’t read his damn number, after all. He handed the paper and the pen over and watched in delight as Steve stuffed the paper into his pocket.

“You’re holding up the line,” Bucky growled dangerously. He hit the button under the till that moved items down the belt, and tossed a plastic bag onto the cans of pumpkin puree. “Scram.”

Tony scooped up his change and grabbed his things before they could shoot out of reach, flashing Steve a smile. “I’ll call you!” he said.

“I’ll be waiting,” Steve said with a grin.

Tony practically skipped all the way back to the tower. He whistled on the way up to his penthouse and swung his bags back and forth, only stopping when he accidentally smacked himself in the shins. Still rubbing at his bruised shins, all the while valiantly avoiding his bruised ego, he stepped out into the penthouse to find Pepper and Rhodey sitting at his dining table. There was a paper bag on the table in between them; it was stained with grease.

Pepper tapped her foot on the floor. “Out buying groceries?” she drawled.

Tony slung his bag of groceries onto the kitchen table, nearly squashing the paper bag. “I got his number,” he said, gleefully punching the air. He picked up the paper bag and peeled it open, grinning. “I got his number and you brought me burgers and fries!”

Rhodey and Pepper exchanged a bemused look.

“You got a phone number?” Rhodey asked.

“*Hot Bagboy’s* number – *Steve Roger’s* number,” Tony said. He tore the cardboard box holding his burger open and bit into the burger, letting out a groan. “Oh god. Burgers – so *good*.”

“You got his number?” Pepper turned to Rhodey, grinning widely. “He’s been hitting on that guy for weeks!”

“Really?” Rhodey hummed. “Well, at least he got off his ass and finally asked.”

Tony took another bite of burger and scowled at Rhodey and Pepper in turn.

“So,” Pepper said, resting her folded hands on her knee. “Where are you taking him?”

“I don’t know,” Tony admitted. He sat down, burger clutched in hand, his mind racing. He hadn’t even thought about where he should take Steve – all he had been thinking about was the victory. What was he supposed to do? Would Steve want to go out to dinner? That was pretty standard. Dinner and a movie? He had only ever been on two or three dates in his life. Most of his hookups had stayed just that – hookups and nothing more.

“Tony?” Pepper said, leaning forwards.

Tony dropped his burger. Oh shit – he hadn’t told Steve his last name. He had written Tony down on that stupid piece of paper, but he hadn’t written a Stark behind it.

“Tony?” Rhodey called out, leaning around Pepper.

Tony picked the burger up. It would be fine. Steve seemed like a great guy – and a great guy needed to be wooed appropriately. He would have to do something special, something no one else would do, so dinner would have to be memorable – tasty, delicious and memorable. He reached into his pocket. There was only one person he knew who could help him.

“Tony,” Pepper sighed, prodding Tony in the kneecap.

Tony jerked in his seat, startled. “What?” he croaked.

“You’re looking a little pale there buddy,” Rhodey said. “Are you ok?”

“I’m fine,” Tony said, giving his head a shake. “Where’s my tablet?”

“It is in your bedroom, sir,” Jarvis said.

Tony rose to get it. Pepper smacked him in the knee.

“Eat. Your tablet can wait,” Pepper grumbled.

“But,” Tony said.

“No buts,” Pepper said, crossing her arms over her chest. “I know you. If you go get your tablet, your food is going to sit there until it starts turning green and fuzzy. Eat first – you can message Captain America later.”

“But,” Tony groaned.

“Didn’t you hear the lady?” Rhodey said, crossing his arms over his chest. “No buts.”

Tony sullenly returned to chewing his burger. He finished it and tried to stand up; he was hit in the knee again.

“And the fries,” Pepper said, nodding to the grease stained paper bag.

Tony grumbled to himself and pulled the bag out. He bit into his first fry, expecting to have to fake delight, and found himself proved wrong. He devoured the container of fries, licking his salty fingers clean and looked into the paper bag for more. When he looked up at Pepper, feeling crushed by the fact that there wasn’t even a broken fry left in the bag, he saw that she was trying hard not to laugh.

“What?” he said, staring mournfully at the paper bag.

“You can go get your tablet now,” Pepper said.

Tony stood up. “Oh,” he said, crumpling up the paper bag. “Right.” He walked calmly over to the couch and then bolted for his bedroom.

Tony scowled down at his tablet; he was lying on his bed on his stomach, and so far, the words wouldn’t come. The question was easy. What should he make for dinner to win Steve Rogers’ heart? But phrasing something like that to make it sound less squishy was hard. How was he supposed to ask for help from the guy he had been blatantly hitting on? He groaned aloud and rolled over so he could stare up at the ceiling.

“Jarvis?” Tony said. “Should I ask Captain America for help or not?”

“Sir?” Jarvis said.

“I mean, I like Cap too. The guy’s a sweetheart, but he’s online – for all I know, he’s someone’s *grandmother*,” Tony said.

“Would you like me to track Captain America’s IP address? I believe I can locate his name and home address for you, sir,” Jarvis offered.

“No, no,” Tony said, lifting up his tablet. “That feels like cheating.”

“If you say so, sir,” Jarvis said.

“You know what? Fuck it. I like him, but it’s not like I’ll ever meet the guy. I’ll ask him what I should do,” Tony said. He began typing.

‘*Hey, Cap! I asked this amazing guy out today, and I kind of want to make him something special for dinner. Any suggestions? I mean, it doesn’t have to be anything fancy like lobster or whatnot – I just want him to be happy. Thanks in advance – you’re awesome, seriously. ;)’ – Iron Man*

Tony hit send and reached for his phone. One task down, one more to go.

Captain America’s response came early that morning.

‘*Hey! I’m glad to hear you found someone! :) I’ll admit I’m a little jealous, but I guess that’s how things work, huh? I have a few recipes you might want to check out for your date – he’ll love them. Trust me.’ – Captain America*

Tony looked over the suggested recipes, grinning from ear to ear. He had been right; Cap had been the go-to guy for good food. Everything Cap had suggested looked amazing. Now to check his phone and see how much time he had to prepare.

He gnashed his teeth.

There was no message from Steve.

Alright, he told himself. It would be fine. Steve was probably just busy. The guy had to work, after all, and it wasn’t like it had been all that long. He would just have to wait and get some work done in the meantime. There was a list of ingredients he had to compile, not to mention a heap of papers he needed to sign before Pepper ripped his head off – not to mention the pile of blueprints he needed to edit for the production line.

Sighing to himself, he got up and went to work.

Tony went to the grocery store as a last resort. It was the one place he knew Steve might be. He had tried phoning him three times the night before, but Steve hadn’t answered and he hadn’t returned any of Tony’s texts, either. He wrung his hand and snatched up a basket; he held his list of ingredients tightly in his other hand and checked it compulsively as he made his way around the store. He didn’t want to ruin the surprise, but he needed to see Steve.

He finished his shopping, having been run over no less than three different times by overenthusiastic shoppers, and made his way to the till. He stood up on the tips of his toes and looked around.

Steve was nowhere to be seen.

Bucky, however, was standing at a till all by himself. He looked hassled and angry – more so than usual.

Hedging his bets, Tony approached Bucky's till and set his things down on the conveyer belt.

Bucky looked up from the cash register and let out a long, suffering sigh. His hair was pulled back, and while it appeared to have been washed for once, it was starting to struggle against his hair-tie.

"So uh," Tony said, clearing his throat. "Have you seen Steve?"

"Of course I've seen Steve," Bucky growled, scanning a can of condensed milk. "I *live* with him."

Tony tried not to wilt under Bucky's gaze.

"He hasn't called you back, has he?" Bucky said with a sigh. He leaned heavily against the conveyer belt and rolled his shoulders, rubbing at the stump that had once been his arm.

"I can make you an arm if you want," Tony blurted out.

Bucky cocked an eyebrow. "Do you offer to make everyone arms?"

"No, it just looks like a lot of work to have only the one arm," Tony said. He winced, hearing himself a second too late. "I mean, it's not that you're doing a shitty job or something – I just thought you might want to take a break off of your other arm before it gets all beefy and massive."

Bucky let out a startled laugh.

Tony tried valiantly to ignore the sweat dripping down the back of his neck.

"Ok, look," Bucky said, giving Tony a tired smile. "Steve's sick. He was up all night puking – I don't know what the fuck he has, so don't ask. The point is, he's probably been sleeping all day and he likely hasn't felt well enough to so much as pick up his phone, let alone return your calls, so calm the fuck down and stop trying so hard."

Tony pulled out his wallet; his cheeks felt like they were on fire. He wondered if he could get away with putting the bag of groceries on his head so he could hide. Normally he was suave, *good* at this kind of thing, but whenever he was around Steve, or Bucky – an extension of Steve, he supposed – he always felt like he making a fool of himself no matter what he did.

"Were you serious, though?" Bucky asked, pursing his lips. He picked up the bag of apples and weighed it, slinging them onto the conveyer belt behind him.

“About the arm?” Tony said. “Of course. I’m an electrical engineer. It’s about time I started looking at prosthetics again.”

Bucky’s jaw dropped. “Oh my fucking *god*,” he wheezed, staring directly at Tony’s face.

“What?” Tony said with a scowl. It was unnerving having Bucky pay attention to him.

“You’re *him*,” Bucky said, still staring at Tony as if he had just grown thirteen heads and a tail. “You’re Tony Stark!”

Tony’s scowl deepened. “Yeah – so?”

“Shit,” Bucky laughed, shaking his head. “You can actually do it too. Holy hell, I thought you were just out of your goddamned *mind*.”

“Uh, generally speaking, that’s kind of rude to say to someone,” Tony said with a laborious sigh.

“You were absolutely serious,” Bucky said, grabbing Tony’s groceries off of the conveyer belt. He was far gentler with them this time, setting each one down on the belt behind him as if it was made of glass.

“I said I was, didn’t I?” Tony drawled.

“He’s going to shit bricks,” Bucky chuckled. “Damn. Steve is not going to see this one coming – not in a million years.”

Tony winced. The last thing he wanted was for Steve to get nervous around him on their first date; those were tricky enough on their own.

“Don’t worry,” Bucky said, seeming to understand Tony’s discomfort. “I won’t tell him. He can find it out the old fashioned way – you can tell him yourself.”

“Thanks,” Tony said, relaxing against the side of the till. He hadn’t realized he had been holding himself so tensely until he tried to move. He wiggled his fingers, forcing himself to stop clenching down on his wallet.

“You’re going to make me a new arm,” Bucky said, grinning toothily. “I think that’s a good trade.”

Tony laughed. “Alright – deal. You’ll have to drop by the tower sometime so I can take measurements for it,” he said.

“Alright,” Bucky said. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his pen. “I uh,” he cleared his throat, his cheeks going faintly pink. “Shit. I can’t really write all that great,” he admitted.

Tony pulled his phone out of his pocket and pulled up a blank contact list. He set it down on the conveyer belt. “How about you just type the number in directly?”

Bucky smiled in relief. He put the pen away and delicately tapped at Tony's phone. When he was done, he picked the phone up and handed it back to Tony.

The woman standing behind Tony cleared her throat loudly and began tapping her foot.

"Your bill is one hundred and thirty dollars," Bucky said, glancing at the register.

"Right," Tony nodded. He put his phone away and sorted through his bills. He handed the money to Bucky, who stacked it on top of the register and counted through it carefully, sorting the bills into piles he could easily manage.

"You're holding up the line," Bucky said, gruffly, handing Tony back his change.

Tony grinned. "Thanks," he said.

"Any time," Bucky said, giving Tony a choppy salute. "See you around, Tony."

"Same to you, Bucky," Tony said.

Tony yawned into his sleeve. He had been up all night working on plans for Bucky's arm, and hadn't even realized it was morning until Dummy had jabbed him in the back with a smoothie. He drank it listlessly, going over the floating schematics in front of him. So far, everything looked good structurally. All he needed now was a few readouts from Bucky and he would be able to put the arm into production. Fine-tuning would make the arm even better, but for now, his work was done.

His phone buzzed on the table in front of him. He put down the smoothie and picked up the phone, rubbing at his tired eyes.

There, glowing in beautiful blue, was a text from Steve.

'*Sorry Tony! I would have texted you earlier, but I was sick as a dog for the past two days and I couldn't really get out of bed. I'm feeling much better now, though, so we can make plans for dinner any time you like. Let me know what works for you, sincerely, Steve Rogers.'*

Tony grinned tiredly at Dummy. He nudged the robotic arm with his shoulder. "He texted me back!"

"Sir?" Jarvis said, sounding concerned. "Are you alright?"

"Steve texted me back," Tony said with a yawn. "What's the first day I have free?"

"Your schedule is clear for the rest of the week, sir. Might I make a suggestion?" Jarvis said.

"Sure," Tony said. "Suggest away."

“Perhaps a weekend would be an appropriate choice for Mr. Rogers? I believe he works during the week,” Jarvis said.

“Good point,” Tony said. There were three days until Saturday; that would be enough time for a practice dinner or two, and Steve would get to work in peace. He typed his response out and grinned lopsidedly when Steve responded almost immediately.

“Alright,” Tony said. “Saturday at six p.m. it is. Mark my calendar!”

“Done, sir,” Jarvis said. “Might I make another suggestion?”

Tony put his head down on his desk.

“Sir?”

Tony began to snore.

Jarvis sighed.

Saturday came by faster than Tony had expected.

After cleaning the kitchen up, he got dressed, pulling on a casual jacket, shirt and pants. He picked a soft grey colour, wanting to keep things light and cheery; black looked better, but he rarely wore it these days unless he absolutely had to – he found it too grim.

Tony looked around, checking his surroundings for deficiencies that might make him look like a horrible, undateable, person even though the penthouse was impeccably cleaned, and he had spent hours making sure everything was just right. Steve wasn’t going to find any old underwear lying out, or misplaced socks – not tonight.

Tonight, Steve would see a homemade dinner. The food was set out on his dining room table, displayed in the most casual crockery Tony had been able to find on short notice. There was macaroni and cheese, apple-and-pecan salad, and three different types of baking powder biscuits; after the appetizers were finished, Tony would bring out the ham waiting in the stove. Lastly, he would return for the Apple Cake, hiding underneath a heavy marble cover.

Tony glanced at his watch. Steve would be arriving any minute.

The elevator chimed.

Tony panicked. Shit – shit – shit! Was everything right? It looked alright – was it?

“Mr. Rogers has entered the elevator, sir,” Jarvis said.

“Great,” Tony said, pacing his way back and forth between the door and the kitchen. He needed to calm down. It would be fine. Steve wasn’t going to scream at him – Steve was

nice! Even if there was a hair in the food – oh god! Let there be no hairs in the food – oh god – oh god – oh god!

The elevator door opened, revealing a baffled looking Steve Rogers. He had dressed up for the evening too, and was wearing what was probably his best suit; it was a sapphire blue, and while it didn't quite fit his massive frame it left little to the imagination. He stepped out of the elevator and looked around, beaming at Tony.

"Hello," Steve said with a cough. He had a bottle of wine in his hands; he spun it nervously.

"Hey," Tony said. "I'm glad you could make it."

"Same here," Steve chuckled. "I was worried I was catching a cold again, but I think it was just nerves."

"Nerves?" Tony grinned and batted his eyelashes. "Why were you nervous? Seeing someone *handsome* tonight?"

Steve smirked. "Maybe," he said. He stepped into the kitchen and took a long, slow, look at the table where dinner had been set out. His eyes widened; he looked between the food and Tony. He nearly dropped the bottle of wine.

"What?" Tony said, looking at the food and then Steve. Had he done something wrong? Was Steve deathly allergic to something he had cooked? He had tried to keep everything allergy friendly, but now that he was looking at the table, he could see where something might have snuck in. Was it a Gluten allergy? Could that be it? Was it lactose intolerance? Oh god – had he almost poisoned Steve somehow? Had he gone and fucked up?

"You – you're Iron Man!" Steve said.

Tony squinted at Steve. "What?"

"You're Iron Man," Steve repeated.

"I'm – uh," Tony cleared his throat. "Sorry?"

"You're Iron Man," Steve said again, staring at the food on the table. "Holy shit. You're Iron Man."

Tony continued to stand stock-still.

"I'm Captain America," Steve explained. He set his bottle of wine on the table and stuffed his hands into his pockets. His cheeks went faintly pink. "I uh, I run Shit on a Shingle."

Tony's throat felt like it had dried up. He croaked and took a step towards the table to steady himself, not trusting his legs to hold out. "Oh," he managed to get out. "Shit."

Steve's face went bright red. "You didn't know," he said.

Tony shook his head. Holy *fuck*, he had asked Steve Rogers how to win over Steve Rogers and he hadn't even known it. He felt dizzy; the world felt like it was spinning. He needed to sit down. Warm arms surrounded him. He leaned into the touch, desperate for something to cling to.

"Tony? Are you alright?" Steve asked. He helped Tony sit down and then knelt down in front of him. His eyes widened. "Oh my god," he said. "You're Tony Stark!"

Tony nodded numbly.

"That rat *bastard*!" Steve grumbled.

"Who?" Tony asked.

"Bucky! He told me he didn't know your last name!" Steve said. He pinched the bridge of his nose, holding onto the arm of Tony's chair as if it was the only think keeping him upright. "When he said you offered to help him get a new arm I thought he was out of his goddamned mind!"

Tony chuckled. "Nope – he's sane," he said.

"I see," Steve sighed. He smiled tentatively at Tony. "So," he said, clearing his throat.

"Yeah," Tony said, sheepishly. "Surprise?"

"You want me to be happy, huh?" Steve asked.

Tony let out a startled laugh. He scratched at his beard. Shit – he hadn't thought Steve would ever see that comment. "Of course I do," he said. "I've been trying to ask you out for a long time. You're a nice guy Steve – I've seen you carry groceries out to people's cars. Hell, you once carried someone to their car when they hurt their ankle. You deserve to be happy."

"You saw that?" Steve said.

"Of course I did," Tony snorted. "The only reason I go shopping on my own is because I get to see you."

Steve swallowed hard and leaned closer, licking his lips. "Tony?"

Tony leaned forwards. "Yeah?"

"Can I kiss you?" Steve asked.

Tony grabbed Steve by the tie and kissed him hard. Steve settled his hands on Tony's thighs. When they broke apart, he was panting and his face was flushed.

"Steve?" Tony said, watching Steve's mouth. He wasn't sure, but he could swear he could taste Apple Cake on Steve's lips.

"Yeah?" Steve said, breathlessly.

“Did I tell you that your blog is awesome? Because I think it just got me laid,” Tony said with a smirk. “You might have to put a warning on your recipes.”

Steve kissed Tony again, tangling his fingers in his hair. He pulled back slowly. “I think it got you a boyfriend too,” he said solemnly. “I mean, if you want one, that is.”

Tony grinned. “I *definitely* want one.”

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